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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of a reading teacher's effectiveness can best be achieved through the analysis of the process whereby the teacher develops interest and skills in the student. In determining the development of skills, the danger for researchers lies in assuming that achievement at the appropriate grade level is commensurate with achievement to the best of the individual student's abilities. The identification of reading successes is further complicated by the unknown relationship between the particular reading approach used and outcomes noted. A definition of the effective reading teacher as one whose students achieve at a level significantly greater than that expected at initial diagnosis is more likely to address the question of the process of student learning. The determination of differential levels of achievement and their relationship to specific teaching techniques can then serve as a basis for teacher training. (KS)

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The Effective Reading Teacher: What are the Missing Pieces?

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The Effective Reading Teacher: What are the Missing Pieces?

Defining an effective teacher of reading is not difficult; clarifying that definition is. The definition offered by most colleagues and students in the reading methods classes is: "The effective reading teacher develops the necessary reading skills for independent reading and fosters an interest in reading a wide variety of materials at a level appropriate to the children's ability." Although some might argue with the semantics of this definition, people concerned with reading would probably agree that if all teachers did develop the reading skills of their pupils to a level commensurate with their abilities, and concurrently fostered an interest in reading, that these teachers would indeed be effective.

However, to argue that this definition begs clarification in relation to the question of "how" (the process) is legitimate. How does the effective reading teacher develop the reading skills? How does the effective reading teacher foster an interest in reading? The specific answers to these questions are not available and these are missing pieces that have not yet been found.

One larger piece of this puzzle that needs to be found before the "how" piece will fit, is to determine just what is meant by effective. It is the authors' contention that a consensus regarding the product (the result of the process) must be agreed upon. When neither the process nor product is known and/or agreed upon, a state of anomie will continue to exist in the reading profession. In terms of the previously offered definition, the meaning of the term "effective" is evident: to develop reading skills for independent reading and to foster an interest in reading at a level appropriate to the children's abilities. However, there are some difficulties for teachers, administrators, and researchers in determining when one teacher is an effective teacher of reading and another is a less effective reading teacher. This difficulty lies in clarifying the portion of the definition concerned with the level of the children's abilities.

Newspapers and popular magazines frequently rail about the results of testing programs that indicate many students are not reading up to their grade level placement. Is this the solution to the problem of determining what constitutes the highest level of the children's ability? Is the effective reading teacher one whose children read at or above grade level? Hardly. Those familiar with the manner in which standardized tests are normed realize that fifty percent of the students in the United States will not read at their grade level placement. Furthermore, it is an accepted fact that students can read at or above their grade level placement

and still not read at a level commensurate with their reading abilities. Conversely, students can be reading below their grade level and still be reading at a level that is appropriate considering their abilities.

Possibly, the answer lies in research results that reflect a significant gain in pupils' reading achievements for teachers who used a particular reading approach compared to teachers who used a "more traditional" reading approach. Accepting this as a criterion of effectiveness implies this is the approach that makes a difference in students' reading achievement, rather than the teacher who used the approach. The results of the First Grade Studies (1967), however, support the idea that it is not so much the reading approach that determines effectiveness as it is the teachers and their competency with a particular reading approach. Also, the risk accepting a comparison of reading approaches as a definition of effectiveness is compounded by the problem of not knowing if the observed differences, although significant, truly reflect an achievement appropriate to the students' reading potential.

For the educational researcher, significant findings are rewarding. However, when investigating effective reading instruction, significant differences may not reflect effective teaching. The reading approaches that reflect significant differences have to be suspect in terms of how robust they are. Because researchers can, and usually do, monitor the treatment groups to be assured that the treatment was administered (teachers did use the experimental approach), the teachers in the field

may omit or modify one small portion of the approach, thus jeopardizing any possibility of getting similar results with the reading achievement of their pupils.

The previous considerations for identifying effectiveness are limited to only two examples and do not exhaust all the possibilities for determining what constitutes effectiveness. For example, such important generic variables as a teacher's personality, warmth and acceptance of pupils' ideas could be related to effectiveness in terms of how they affect pupil reading achievement. However, this stance requires making decisions regarding which areas should be investigated and then hoping that the selected area relates to student achievement. For example, suppose teacher warmth is highly suspected as being an important indicator of teacher effectiveness, and two groups of teachers are identified, those who exhibit the trait of warmth and those who do not. Then, typically, a measure of student achievement in reading is made, and the characteristics of teacher warmth are statistically treated in relation to student achievement. If the results significantly favor the "warm" teachers, then this variable could be considered important in defining what is an effective reading teacher. Again, the logic of such a procedure has to be questioned. Would the differences have occurred even if these teachers were identified as members of the "less warm" group? Probably so, because one has to suspect that it is something the teachers are doing in their actual reading instruction that

foster achievement, rather than a vacillating characteristic such as warmth. Further, even though both groups of teachers' students may have made reading gains, how can one be assured that the gains were appropriate for the pupils associated with these teachers? Limited gains may have been achieved by some of the students that could have been tremendous gains when the factor of where they were when they began their reading instruction is considered. This consideration reemphasizes an important point for those interested in identifying effective reading instruction: minimal student achievement in reading may really be associated with effective instruction if the predicted reading achievement level of the students is taken into consideration.

As the examples indicate, identifying that which is an inappropriate method for determining what makes an effective teacher of reading may be easier than stating what is effective. However, if logic would serve as the primary factor toward solving this dilemma, then part of the solution to the puzzle may be close at hand. An agreeable consensus of what makes a reading teacher an effective one might be found in the research and writing of Saadeh (1970), Rosenshine (1970), and McNeil and Popham (1973). They are in agreement that the effective teacher should be identified in terms of pupil outcomes measures. In other words, how does the final product (modification in the learner) compare with the expected levels of achievement? Translated into terminology appropriate to identifying what

constitutes effectiveness in reading instruction-- the effective reading teacher is one whose students, at the end of the school year, achieve at the reading level significantly greater than that which would be expected. Although this definition is not reflective of grade level placement, measures of pre-post test differences with a given reading approach or individual student reading achievement, it deals directly with the responsibilities of the teachers -- student learning.

If this definition of an effective reading teacher would be adopted by everyone concerned with the reading instruction of children, then a great deal of progress toward improving reading instruction could be initiated. Though the product is known -- adjusted pupil gain-- the process to reach this goal is not known or agreed upon, for students differ much in skills, attitudes and abilities as do teachers. At the present time decision-making in the teaching-learning process has to be viewed as idiosyneratic, left very much to the judgment of individual teachers. While recent research on teacher effectiveness has generated several generic behaviors associated with adjusted pupil gain, further research efforts are needed to increase our knowledge of specifics in the processes to be employed in various instructional settings. Solving this larger piece of the puzzle could eventually lead to the answers to the question of "how". When an agreement can be reached extraneously that an effective reading teacher is one whose students make significant gains in their reading achievement as indicated by the comparison of their achievement with their

end-of-year achievement then, determining what makes these teachers effective can be examined. After that is deduced, we will be able to use their methods as a guide for in-service training, pre-service education and research investigations. Then the "how" piece of the puzzle will be solved and put into its place.

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